

# Essence of Beauty Debate

Considering F.M. Dostoyevsky\*

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**Abstract**—The article is dedicated to the debate on the essence of beauty through the prism of the evolution from the ideas of Fyodor Dostoyevsky about beauty in a broad historical-philosophical context (Plato, Kant, Schelling, Vl. Solovyov, N. Berdyaev, V. Zenkovsky). The author of the article distinguishes and describes the three stages in Dostoyevsky's views on beauty: "Schiller", "The Brothers Karamazov" and "Sophian". Beauty is viewed from the standpoint of spiritual cognition, proceeding from the concept of spiritual archetype of the mankind, which represented by the Trinity of Truth, Virtue, and Beauty united by Love.

**Keywords**—*Spiritual creativity; theurgy; spiritual archetype of the mankind; beauty; platonism; sophiology*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Virtue, truth, and beauty are the three sides of anyone's spiritual life, being ontological in nature with the highest form of beauty being born from the blooming of the souls. Plato, Schelling, Vl. Solovyov, and Dostoyevsky talk about the need for beauty to become a symbol of all human ideals; a developed individual strives for expression of love in the same degree as beauty. Spiritual works create beauty in everything, especially in art, as beauty is the highest expression of harmony and perfection. Along with goodness and truth, beauty is one of the parties of the spiritual archetype of mankind. Vl. Solovyov wrote that "these three live only in the Union. Virtue, separated from truth and beauty, is only an indefinite sense, an impotent passion. The abstract truth is just a word, and the beauty without virtue and truth is an idol. Truth is virtue, conceivable by a human mind; beauty is the same virtue and truth, embodied in a living actual form. Its full embodiment is already the end goal, the perfection, that is why Dostoyevsky said that beauty would save the world" [1. P. 305 - 306]. This has been deeply acknowledged by Plato who once said that "now the beauty only befell the ability to be visible and to inspire love" [2. P. 215]. The philosopher wrote that "the lover of beauty is passionate", that through the love to beauty one undergoes a spiritual ascent, described in his "Symposium".

## II. BEAUTY DEBATE: CONSIDERING F. DOSTOYEVSKY

There are two points of view regarding the concept of beauty: the ontological, realistic one (Plato, Schelling, Dostoyevsky, Vl. Solovyov) and the deontological, nominalist one. I. Kant sought to justify the latter one. He deontologised aesthetical judgments ("by themselves, they don't contribute to the knowledge of things"); divorced aesthetic and logic, depriving the former of all objectivity and attributing the latter of importance for cognition. For Kant, aesthetic is associated with pleasure and displeasure and, therefore, cannot be applied to cognition: "beauty is that liked without notion". Beauty is "expediency without purpose" [3. P. 8, 57, 64]. Kant denied the rule of taste as objective and denied, on this basis, the ideal of beauty. In this case, we are unable to speak of spiritual cognition.

On the contrary, Schelling, the founder of the philosophy of art, defines beauty from the standpoint of truth cognition: "the eternal concept of a thing is undeniably beautiful". According to Plato, a thing's eidos as its prototype contains not only the ontological basis but also the aesthetically beautiful form, aesthetic purpose, and meaning. Beauty is thus ontological – as a phenomenon of truth. Schelling notes in this regard: "The only highest truth is not stray from beauty, beauty is not stray from truth, as truth that is not beauty cannot be truth, like beauty that is not truth cannot be beauty". The philosopher continues: "... those, seeking truth only, reach just a rough naturalism... others, completely alien to truth, create empty and weak facade of a form, that causes delight of the ignorant, calling it beautiful. ... the supreme unity of beauty and truth – is the unity of philosophy and poetry: for doesn't philosophy strive for the eternal truth, equal to beauty; and doesn't poetry strive for beauty, knowing no birth and no death, equal to truth?" [4. P. 498]. In his 1802 letter to Schlegel, Schelling writes: "... the universe, being in the absolute as an organic whole, remains also as the work of art, as the artistic whole. Music, literature, painting – the arts, as art in general, have their for-itself-being in the absolute". Thus, art in Schelling's teaching is a special kind of spiritual cognition of the absolute. F. Nietzsche defined art as "the great stimulant of life", although, for his coeval culture, moral truth was not always consistent with life and beauty, so for the philosopher "art is smarter than truth" [5. P. 160].

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VI. Solovyov sought to give art a theurgic function. This term is widely used in occultism. Initially, it emerges in the bosom of magic, having hermetic and neoplatonic interpretation. Basically, the term means the possibility of mastering the magical mysterious sources, a certain influence on God. In terms of the Russian theurgists (varying from VI. Solovyov to the Silver age poets, N. Berdyaev and other figures of the "new religious consciousness"), this means the possibility of direct transformation of being through aesthetics, which begets "aesthetic utopianism". VI. Solovyov wrote in his first "Speech in Memoriam of Dostoyevsky" (wrongfully, in our opinion, attributing his own thoughts to Dostoyevsky): "Artists and poets must once again become priests and prophets, but in the more important and sublime meaning: not only a religious idea is to own them, but they themselves will possess it and consciously manage its earthly incarnations. There are no representatives of such religious art, but there are harbingers, such as Dostoyevsky" [1. P. 294]. In this case, the creationist properties of the absolute are being attributed to the artist, poet, creative genie at all. V. Zenkovsky and S. Bulgakov criticized such understanding of the role of art. According to V. Zenkovsky, "the unfortunate idea of a theurgic task of art distorted aesthetic self-consciousness in the symbolism from the inside" (V. Ivanov, A. Blok, A. Bely and others) [6. P. 95]. According to S. Bulgakov, "...theurgy as a human effort is impossible and is a misconception of theomachy" [7. P. 334].

V. Zenkovsky also detects a "concealed dream of "restoring" humanity", "Christian naturalism" and "aesthetic utopianism" ("Schillerism") in Dostoyevsky's world view. The aforementioned utopianism stems from the fact that Dostoyevsky had originally thought of salvation through beauty, considering it in a Platonic manner as something "already existing", "transformed", through which one may understand the truth. This, in turn, derives from his "Christian naturalism", according to which "salvation may and must come from the man himself". "The temptation of naturalism", according to Zenkovsky, is that "in these perspectives, the Church is conceived not as the Body of Christ, not as a theanthropist organism, but as a dwelling power, fused with nature, that had already entered the world". This especially affects the sermons of the Elder Father Zosima, who views "life as heavens" (already now! - emphasizes Zenkovsky). V. Zenkovsky continues: "All the flavor of naturalism affects the plentitude, the perfection, which is conceived in Christ as the man, somehow related to the common man as his hidden, pristine shrine. For Dostoyevsky, the children shone that beauty, the Elder Father Zosima had already concluded the "secret renovation of all" [8. P. 150]. Eschatology, however, shall not destroy the worldly meaning that people intend to assert on the planet. Dostoyevsky doesn't have pantheistic theanthropism of the subsequent philosophers-sophiologists (perhaps, through the lens of which Zenkovsky views Dostoyevsky) but has that "pain of man", the sympathy, the desire to help and individual to attain salvation from sin. It appears to us that Zenkovsky invents Dostoyevsky's themes, which the writer himself wouldn't have interpreted this way.

Anyway, the Russian philosophy chronographer acknowledges in Dostoyevsky his belief that "in the worship of beauty, the darkest in an individual transforms", that exactly "through the aesthetic experience the otherwise unavailable higher truth possesses and strengthens a soul" (Alyosha and Grushenka, Prince Myshkin and Nastasya Filipovna). Zenkovsky writes further, Dostoyevsky believed that "only in the aesthetic sphere reveals itself a genuine, yet chaotic fullness of everything present in the soul" and believed simultaneously "in aesthetic responsiveness as the most victorious force in all of us" [9. P. 95]. Yet, Zenkovsky didn't cover the whole of Dostoyevsky's idea of the saving power of beauty. Beauty is not just aesthetic, tragic and, nevertheless, saving and grace-filled phenomenon, but erotic in every sense of the word, spiritual and sensual. Dostoyevsky recognized and depicted that deeply, yet this relationship is not sufficiently seen and dealt with in the research literature. Deeply energetic links among gender, beauty, and spiritual renewal are what the writer sought to understand, anticipating in a way the philosophy of gender by V.V. Rozanov. The connection between gender and beauty was already outlined by V. Zenkovsky while analyzing the image of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, unjustly almost forgotten by the critics. According to the Russian philosophy chronographer, the novel shows "the problem of gender, lying in the depths of other problems", which, in turn, "go back to the 'secret' of gender"; "Not the dialectic of 'virtue' reveals us the inner unity of the novel, but the dialectic of gender and its sublimations (in terms of modern psychopathology) does" [10. P. 265]. Perhaps, this very comprehension of colossal and profound contradictions in the sphere of gender allowed Dostoyevsky to part with "Schillerism" and simplified humanism in his view on beauty and people in general.

### III. EVOLUTION OF F. DOSTOYEVSKY'S VIEWS ON BEAUTY

However, the research follows a certain evolution of Dostoyevsky's view on beauty, extending from Platonism to Orthodox Christianity, from aesthetic utopianism (cf. *The Idiot* - "beauty will save the world") and naturalism to spiritual moralism and tragic realism ("beauty in the world is to be saved"). This evolution was brilliantly disclosed by V. Zenkovsky, who noted: "The formula of saving the world through beauty is purely *sophiological*, as the "saving" of the world is actually "restoration", i.e. the manifestation of the sophistic foundations of the world. Yet, Russian sophiology didn't sufficiently show the "blurring of an aesthetic idea in mankind", the "dark face of created Sophia". Dostoyevsky was closer than any other to this aspect of the problem, in which sophiology is for the first time released from the elements of naturalism and perfectly expresses the Christian doctrine of the world as it is kept by the Orthodox Church" [8. P. 147]. The aesthetic idea is "blurred" because of the gap between beauty and virtue, aesthetic and morality, whereby beauty itself cannot "save the world", but beauty shall be saved in turn from mixing with evil (cf. the beauty image of Nastasya Filipovna in *The Idiot*; "I am falling and consider this to be beautiful", - says Mitya to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*). In this case, beauty is not the saving power, as

it "shines to evil". "Beauty in the world was captured by evil", - that "was understood by Dostoyevsky with horror and anguish" [8. P. 154] and there within lies his rupture with Platonism, pantheism, and aestheticism.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky deepens the concept of beauty and shows that it is not devoid of contradictions. Beauty of "the truth revealed" (Antiquity) becomes a mystery, a problem, a tragedy. Although, Heraclitus said that harmony contains a contradiction: the cosmos is the most beautiful entity and a scattered litter at the same time. Dostoyevsky thought of beauty proceeding from the human soul, his psychology, and spiritual development. True beauty and its true comprehension are not given for no particular reason, they should be gained through suffering - as well as love. So Dostoyevsky: "Beauty is a fearful and terrible thing! Fearful because it's indefinable, and it cannot be defined, because here God gave us only riddles. Here the shores converge, here all contradictions live together. I'm a very uneducated man, brother, but I've thought about it a lot. So terribly many mysteries! Too many riddles oppress man on earth. Solve them if you can without getting your feet wet. Beauty! Besides, I can't bear it that some man, even with a lofty heart and the highest mind, should start from the ideal of the Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom. It's even more fearful when someone who already has the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not deny the ideal of the Madonna either, and his heart burns with it, verily, verily burns, as in his young, blameless years. No, man is broad, even too broad, I would narrow him down. Devil knows even what to make of him, that's the thing! What's shame for the mind is beauty all over for the heart. Can there be beauty in Sodom? Believe me, for the vast majority of people, that's just where beauty lies—did you know that secret? The terrible thing is that beauty is not only fearful but also mysterious. Here the devil is struggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart" [11. XIV. P. 100]. Commenting on "the battlefield" part, V. Zenkovsky notes, that the human heart may be *blinded, captivated by beauty* and then "the struggle of the devil with God goes under cover of beauty" [8. P. 153].

Dostoyevsky's statement on the internal inconsistencies of the concept of beauty attest to the profound crisis of the entire modern culture, where beauty can be thought of as independent and even contrary to virtue, and art - to morality; where harmony and integrity of the spiritual archetype are disrupted, and beauty becomes the *object* of salvation and not its integral force.

Summing up the Dostoyevsky views on the essence and power of beauty, one is able to identify the three following stages, capturing the writer's evolution from the humanistic-Schillerian ideal of the wholeness of the human image to the Orthodox-sophiological one. Herewith, the writer's personality *is being formed by the process of creativity per se*, falling ... into the deep "magnetic field" of in-depth historical-cultural traditions" [12. P. 26]:

1. Schillerian, humanistic stage: "Beauty is normality, health. Beauty is useful because it is beauty because the mankind has the eternal need for beauty and for its ultimate

form" [11. XVIII. P. 102]. Schiller proceeded from the classical, pre-romantic ideal of continuity, truth, virtue and beauty, going back to the ancient cosmological kalos kagathos. According to O.A. Bogdanova, "humanism, once born by Christianity with its attention to an individual, is now transforming itself into religion, deifying Man... in his fallen earthly nature and seeking to create "Heaven on Earth", without God, merely by human efforts through endless social and technological progress: "godman" enters the world" [13. P. 110-111].

2. "Karamazov", dual-polar, contradictory ("Sodom ideal" vs "Madonna ideal") stage, when "the devil is struggling with God". Dostoyevsky reveals fully the "disgrace of beauty" [14. P. 144]. L.M. Rosenblum calls a "misunderstanding" in this regard that the majority of Dostoyevsky's researchers dwell exactly on this writer's beauty comprehension [15. P. 144].

3. Saving, metaphysical stage. Beauty is thought of as associated with "the other worlds", transcendent, supersensible Origin, when the unity of truth, virtue, and beauty is thought as something eternal, approaching the image of the Virgin Mary. Beauty is thus being released from sensuality, "gaining ascetic-sublime traits of the Byzantine-Russian iconography" [13. C. 115]. In his 1875-1876 Notebooks, Dostoyevsky defines beauty as the ideal of the mankind's spiritual development, according to Christ, in contrast to his own journalist essays of the early 1860s [13. P. 116].

According to the Biblical teaching, "humanity" contains in itself wickedness, fall-from-grace, incurable by the human-only means. O.A. Bogdanova indicates in her study: "In Eastern Christianity, the antique kalos kagathos (in the Platonic sense) was gradually melted into super-cosmic, Sophist ideal of the trinity of virtue, truth and beauty found *in God*". The ancient platonic Sophia transforms herewith into the biblical Sophia, the Wisdom of God: "the Orthodox Sophia indicates the original, primordial, designed ideal of a 'divine' individual, distorted by the consequences of original sin. It is very important for the understanding of Dostoyevsky's concept of beauty and its role in the universe, - continues O.A. Bogdanova, - to sense a change in Prince Myshkin's formula: first, beauty itself doesn't save the world; second, the author refers to 'the beauty of Christ', i.e. to theandric beauty and not to the human one" [13. P. 109, 113, 124].

#### IV. N. BERDYAEV ON BEAUTY

It would seem that the apotheosis of "creative" reflection on creativity is N. Berdyaev's *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, where creativity is considered deeply and comprehensively. The author called his work the "experiment of anthropodicea through creativity" in which "mankind is reborn". Berdyaev ontologically considered creativity as the deployment process of human nature, to speak in terms of this given study. Human nature is the destination of spiritual work as only by exploring all the potential an individual unseals as the spiritual archetype of mankind in his own soul and realizes the unity with the

universe and people. Berdyaev wrote that "man precedes philosophy, man is the premise of all philosophical knowledge". And further: "The only Logos, not destroying a man, is those, that is the Absolut Man" [16. P. 261, 277]. We shall, however, object Berdyaev, saying, that a human only as an entity may precede philosophizing, yet a human manifests himself only when philosophizing. Only with this being so, philosophy turns into spiritual doing and not into a concept game of idle fantasy. There is no individual before philosophizing, but an individual himself emerges while philosophizing. There is no individual before philosophizing, as there is no philosophizing before individual: these two are the essential components of a joint spiritual process that creates both man and philosophy. Faith and creative work are found in the same position in relation to a person: they both create the individual while an individual creates them or himself through them.

Berdyaev defines the creative process not only as the philosophizing experience but also as the way of faith, as the "particular religious experience and journey" [16. P. 339]. According to the thinker, the act of creativity is not inherently associated with anything but is rather based on absolute liberty and existence of an individual. However, there is no creativity per se, creativity is a creation of something in particular: of philosophical ideas, religious symbols or works of art. Creativity may manifest itself in a concrete form: universal in singular, eternal in temporal, and spiritual in material. Because of that, the essence of a human being can only be explicated as the essence of the mankind as a whole.

Also, we cannot agree with Berdyaev's notion that one may create "in the name of the devil". Such an approach violates the basic principles of spiritual cognition (the principles, that Berdyaev himself wanted to assert), which leads to evil ontologizing. But evil is destructive by definition, it is unable to create, it can only parasitize on the body of creativity, growing like cancer in a biological organism. Evil shouldn't – and doesn't - have an ontological basis; its source is free will, not established on the path of virtue.

In his unrestrained "creative" urge, Berdyaev allowed himself such anarcho-nihilistic and revolutionary statements: "For the city of God to reign in the world, the old decrepit community, every state, right, and household should *burn to the ground*". Yet, this is not the apotheosis of creativity and freedom but luciferic anarchism [17. P. 144]. Creativity is not M. Bakunin's appetite for destruction but the desire to create in the framework of morality, including nation-building, the establishment of rights and property. In 1917, there were forces that heard the Berdyaev's call, who hadn't realized that absolute freedom (i.e. abuse of power) always ends up with total violence. If Dostoyevsky viewed freedom and creativity only in the shadows of Absolution, Berdyaev, stating that freedom is primary in relation to Existence, saw that "everything was permitted". V. Zenkovsky criticizes Berdyaev for the attempt to be the new prophet, the harbinger of "the new religious consciousness", the "third Testament" with a new morality, opposing the evangelical one. For Zenkovsky, creativity and beauty are not

conceivable outside morality and morality is the highest degree of creativity [9. P. 90-91]. The Gospels do not only "justify" creativity, but require it" [9. P. 93].

## V. CONCLUSION

According to Plato, things gain form, being introduced to the concept of beauty. Beauty is the manifestation of the eternal, infinite in something concrete and specific; love is the revelation of eternity in time. Spiritual creativity is a matter of love, for it represents a human's attempt to connect to eternity. When we are in love with a particular person, we perceive the eternal inside. Beauty forms concise and temporal based on universal and eternal. In a state of spiritual creativity, an individual creates his own existence; he performs co-creativity, resembling the Creator. He fulfills himself in cognition of his essence and deploys the spiritual archetype of the mankind as the Trinity of Virtue, Truth, and Beauty, united by Love.

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